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SUNDAY
MARCH 16, 2003

relative expression

By **BOB KEYES**
Staff Writer

fALMOUTH — A most unusual sign greets visitors to Ray Chen's ceramics studio: "Beware of the chickens." Then again, Chen is a most unusual artist.

A potter by training but a sculptor by ambition, Chen shares studio space in rural Falmouth with an unruly flock, which cackles its displeasure when visitors alight from a car. If you make it past the chickens, which wander freely from their coop, you must then scamper down a slight incline of a hill that leads around to the back of a weather-tight barn and a simple unmarked door.

Inside is a place of inspiring creativity and gentle elegance. This is the unlikely world of Ray Chen, who through his ceramic sculpture

With his expansive 'Mother and Child' series, Portland sculptor Ray Chen contemplates the dynamics of human relationships in a deeply personal way.

is attempting to heal a broken family and find spiritual salvation.

Chen, a 40-year-old native of Taiwan teaching ceramics at the University of Southern Maine, is making a name for himself in the world of ceramics for his continuing "Mother and Child" series of clay sculptures.

This week, he is among 15 artists whose work

is featured at an international ceramics conference in San Diego. The Smithsonian Institution will show a piece later this spring, and Chen will be the subject of a solo gallery show in New York City in the fall.

As his reputation grows nationally — Chen has exhibited across the United States for most of the past decade — he is becoming better known in Maine, where he has lived for two years.

He helped organize last fall's "Pushing Clay" exhibition at USM's Gorham gallery, which attracted international attention. Mainers will have a chance to view his art beginning in April, when the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport hosts "Four Visions," in which Chen will participate with three other ceramics artists.

Admirers describe his work as contemplative, evocative and haunting. His forms are rocklike, and he chooses subdued, earthy colors for his glazes. Grounded in spirituality, his work is based on the dynamics of human relationships.

To fully appreciate Chen's creations, it helps to understand his story.

An unassuming man of few words, Chen began his "Mother and Child" series in the late 1990s as a response to his mother's failing health. He chose to express his grief through his work with the hope of developing a lasting testament to his mother and her maternal instincts.

Please see **SCULPTOR**, Page 8E



Images courtesy

"MOTHER AND CHILD" Above are three examples of the approximately two dozen stoneware/earthenware pieces Ray Chen has completed in his haunting series.

RAY CHEN — Artist and teacher

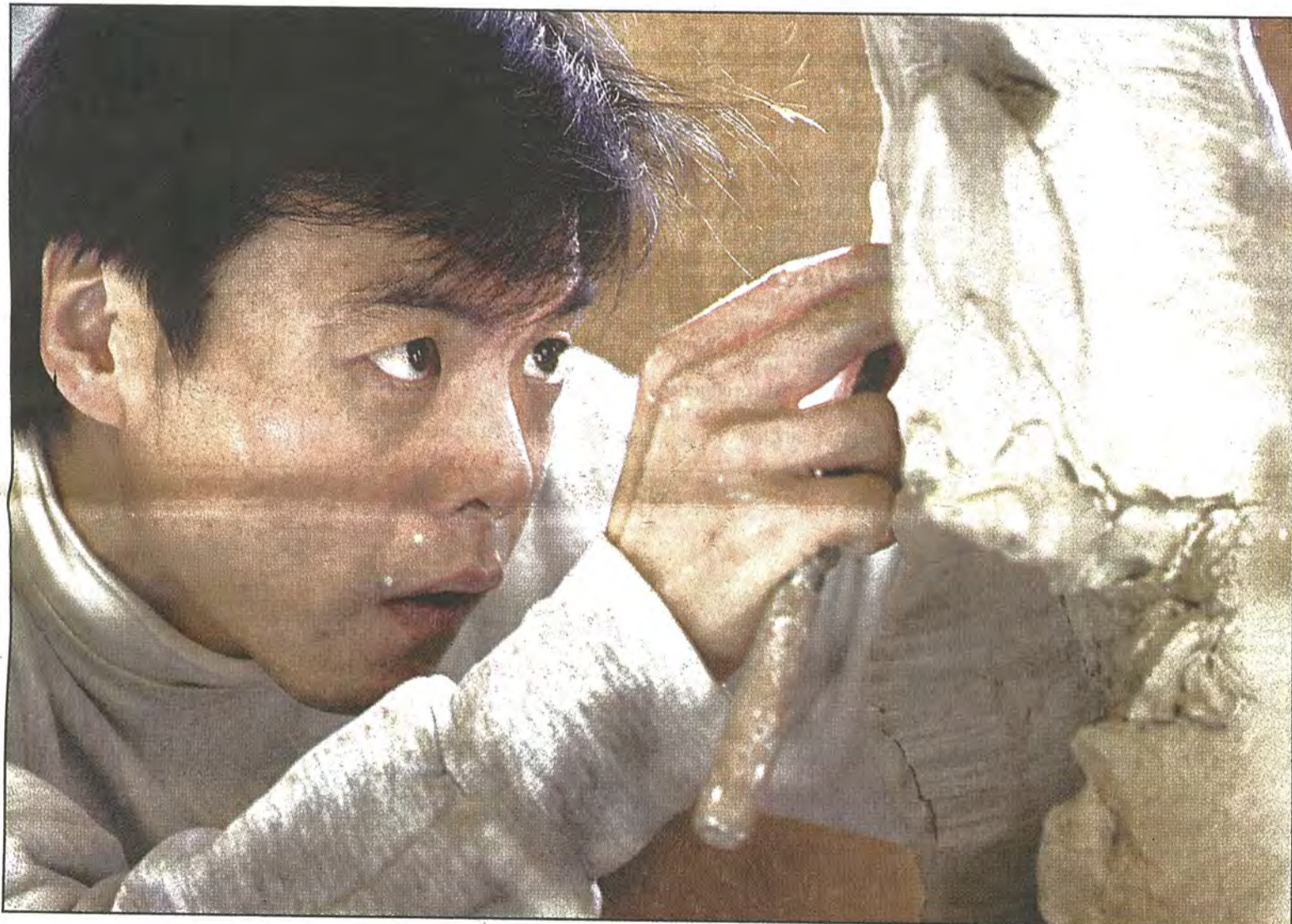
Age: 40

Residence: Portland

Profession: Professor of art at University of Southern Maine

Family: Engaged to be married this summer in Cape Elizabeth

Upcoming exhibition: Chen and three other ceramics artists will be featured in "Four Visions" at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, April 19 through June 6.



Staff photo by Doug Jones

Working at his studio in Falmouth, Ray Chen, a native of Taiwan who teaches ceramics at the University of Southern Maine, shapes clay in a recent piece for his "Mother and Child" sculpture series. Chen says he expects to continue work on the series for at least another decade.

The Shape of Dark: Cape's own 'cautionary tale'

Some residents worry that a former schoolteacher's first novel — inspired by her hometown, Cape Elizabeth — hits too close to home. Others say that what the book portrays happens everywhere.



With the waters of Casco Bay in the background, Sally Martin poses on the grounds of her home in Cape Elizabeth. The

Will Oscar ceremony reflect threat

Historically speaking, the Oscars frequently surface at the

By **ELINA SHATKIN**
Zap2it

SCULPTOR

Continued from Page 1E

His work also attempts to bridge cultural divides, symbolically linking his Asian upbringing with his current Western influences. It also expresses his devout Christianity, serving as a sacrament of sorts while echoing familiar portraits of Madonna and child.

Chen came to the United States in 1991 as an expert potter, classically trained in ancient Chinese forms and technically proficient beyond his years. While he could have crafted a career making functional pottery, he aspired to become a sculptor who works with clay as a medium. He describes himself as a "pure artist. I don't think commercially at all."

The transition from function to fine art wasn't easy. For one thing, relatively few artists were doing similar work, so he had limited influences and outlets for advice. More significant, Chen didn't know the language.

"I wanted to represent myself as a sculptor, so I knew I had to teach myself to speak English," he says. He accomplished that goal by watching TV and renting videotapes, which he rewound and played back incessantly, learning as many nuances of the language as he could.

"I called my classmates and practiced my English with them," he says, recalling his undergraduate days at Ohio University and his graduate-school work at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York.

He found focus for his work – and to a lesser degree, his life – in 1996 when he received word from Taiwan that his mother's ongoing battle with Parkinson's had taken a turn for the worse. As the oldest sibling and the only son in his family, he was responsible for his mother's care. His father abandoned the family when his mother first became ill.



Staff photo by Doug Jones

"He's very Zen-like. He's very quiet, very soft-spoken," says Sharon Sauerwald, an art education major from Cumberland who has taken three classes taught by sculptor Ray Chen. **"He helps with the technical aspect of the medium and then encourages you with the mental aspect."**

Chen returned home to assess the situation. What he found when he got there was a woman whose basic skills were fast deteriorating. He fed and showered his mother, trying to give back in a short time all that he had received in childhood. But he couldn't stay in Taiwan and accomplish his goals as an artist.

"I made a really hard decision when all my

relatives asked me stay in Taiwan. I said, 'If I want success in the future, as this family's only son I have to be in the United States and keep on going.' Otherwise, there was nothing I could accomplish for my family."

He came back to the United States with a renewed dedication to his art and a sharper vision. He launched a series of modernist sculptures solely focused on human relationships, and specifically the bond between a mother and child.

Each of the abstract works represents the umbilical relationship between mother and child – a rough-hewn, earthenware element clinging to a softer, finished piece of stoneware. The earthenware represents his mother's tortured skin. The stoneware is Chen's abiding support.

Chen's reputation as a clay powerhouse escalated in 1997, when he was hired as an instructor at Baltimore Clayworks, one of the nation's most prestigious outlets for ceramic arts. Surrounding himself with artists of comparable talent, Chen flourished. He quickly caught the attention of the National Council on Education for Ceramics Arts, the nation's leading ceramics organization, and his exhibitions began stacking up across the country.

At the same time, his "Mother and Child" series rapidly evolved, as he supplemented his few existing pieces with a flurry of new additions. Still inspired, Chen expects to continue adding to the series for another decade or more.

Friend and fellow artist Patrick Timothy Caughy of Maryland describes Chen as a quiet genius, who goes about his work in subtle ways. He recalls a recent conversation with Chen, during which Chen related an Asian proverb that suggested wise men walk on ice.

"That doesn't mean one walks on eggshells, but one lives a life with attention and care. That's Ray," says Caughy, who taught with Chen at Baltimore Clayworks. "He lives with a sense of deference and discretion."

Caughy says viewers should be patient with Chen's art. Its themes may not be obvious, but they are imbedded in the basic structure of each clay piece, which often consists of two elements discreetly joined and delicately balanced. "And like all significant works of art, it is layer upon layer. You peel back one layer and find another," says Caughy.

One of the layers has religious undertones, with sacramental qualities. Chen, a Baptist, readily acknowledges the connection. "I believe in God, and I believe my work is not just for myself, but for God, who wants me to be an artist and travel and take his work to different places. He sees me as a missionary."

On another level, it's just pure art, adds John Holverson, director of the Jones Museum of Glass and Ceramics. While noting the spiritual elements, Holverson said Chen's work stands solely on its artistic merit. "His shapes are pretty evocative. They look like simple rocklike forms, which people in Maine are used to and respond to, although what we are used to is often in granites."

Michael Shaughnessy, chairman of the USM art department, hired Chen after an intensive national search because of Chen's reputation as an artist and his ability to communicate with students. In two years, Chen has helped revitalized the ceramics department, taking students to national conventions and helping them create pieces that have both artistic merit and market appeal, Shaughnessy says. In addition, the "Pushing Clay" exhibition that Chen helped organize drew international notice.

"He brings a work ethic that is unbelievable, but he also values the connections that go far beyond the state of Maine and go to the national audience. That is very important to the university, to the students and to him professionally," adds Shaughnessy. "We're sort of on the outskirts of things, so it is

important to make those connections. He brings people to Maine very easily, because of his reputation and his connections."

Sharon Sauerwald, an art education major from Cumberland, has taken three of Chen's classes.

"He's very Zen-like. He's very quiet, very soft-spoken," she says. "He encourages you to create your own vision and take it in whatever direction you want to take it. He helps with the technical aspect of the medium and then encourages you with the mental aspect."

Caughy, who worked with Chen at Baltimore Clayworks, is not surprised that his friend has made a quick impact at USM. "He made quite an influence here, with his maturity and quiet dedication and the way he taught. He specializes in individual attention. He doesn't give dazzling displays. He is not a big showman or a cowboy, but there is a sincerity and an awareness that is very powerful."

For now, Chen exercises his quiet power through his art. For hours on end, he immerses himself in his clay, working late into the night in his isolated Falmouth enclave, giving shape and purpose to raw material.

While he is mindful that his "Mother and Child" series will be his ultimate legacy to his mother, he also is hoping she someday will recover from her illness and be able to travel to the United States. He knows that is not likely. These days, he says, she is completely bedridden. "The only thing she can do is communicate with her eyes. She can't eat. She can't talk. She can't pick up anything. She just lays in the bed every day," he says. "I know my mother doesn't have much time to see all this, so I just try to do my best while my mother is alive."

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IN THE STUDIO

Kate Farrington

The Ceramic Sculptures of Ray Chen

Two clay bodies resembling symbiotic inner organs touch and keep each other standing. One is smooth and white, like a bone or an inner ear; the other is a deep, textured gray-brown. The light one, its sides flaring outward like the wings of a stingray, rests softly atop the dark one, which is bent over in a painful curve close to the earth. The stoneware and earthenware bodies are being transformed into two figures of flesh, which convey feelings of calm and comfort as well as the pathos of self-loss and tragedy.

This work is part of a remarkable series of abstract ceramic sculptures, titled *Mother and Child*, by Taiwanese-born, New England-based artist Ray Chen. Since 1997, Chen has produced thirty works in the series out of his studio in rural Falmouth, Maine. Each piece combines Eastern and Western influences and is a meditation on the universal idea of the bond between mother and child. The series narrates the history of Chen's relationship with his mother, who he says is a "constant influence" in his life. As an opera singer, she steered him toward a rigorous classical education in music; as a floral designer, she taught him about esthetics and encouraged him to try ceramics. Tragically, the end of her life was marked by a long struggle with Parkinson's disease. Chen says, "The impact of [my mother's illness] on me has been tremendous, and my artwork has become an emotional expression of my relationship with my mother."

Chen learned ceramics during a traditional seven-year apprenticeship in Taiwan. He was trained in wheel throwing, traditional decoration, and reduction firing as well as in carving, designing, and glazing. Chen eventually ran a professional studio perfecting traditional techniques of Chinese vessel reproductions. With high ambitions for his art, Chen immigrated to the United States to experience a "freedom of ideas" in the context of Western society. In the world of ceramics this "freedom" is the legacy of Peter Voukos and the Otis Group (which also includes Kenneth Price and Jun Kaneko, among others), a circle of California ceramic artists who in the 1950s helped change attitudes toward ceramics, repositioning it as a viable medium for individual expression. This inspired a major revitalization in the field and has led to its acceptance in today's contemporary art world, as evidenced by the successful careers of artists such as Daisy Youngblood, Grayson Perry, Saint Clair Clemin, and Anthony Caro.

Upon his arrival to America, Chen began experimenting for the first time with asymmetrical abstract forms. Liberated from the functionalism traditionally associated with ceramics, Chen attempted to go beyond formal and technical aspects of his work, to give ceramic sculptures the power of ideas. Eventually the challenges of confronting an American environment gave way to realities of assimilation to a cosmopolitan community. In that sense, his work gives an account of the transformation that has taken place in his life and his art.

The works begin as small maquettes; Chen makes models about the size of a fist in which he works out the three-dimensional design concepts of the composition, the touching points, the balance between the elements, and the space in between them. Chen states: "In the maquette, I try to describe an idea. When the piece is finished, I want the work to speak for itself. The title of mother-child leads the direction; it is about feelings and emotions."

Once the initial ideas have been formularized, the slow journey—lasting about a year and a half—of transforming the concepts into a finished piece begins. First, an 80-inch cylinder of clay is thrown on the wheel, and the composition starts to take shape when the clay is removed and reconstructed. As the structure emerges, Chen begins to hand-form the clay.

Ceramics involves solving a complex set of problems. Clay needs to be kept moist enough to prevent cracking, and substances such as silt and grog are added to increase plasticity. Chen feels it is essential to control the aspects of color and texture, so he mixes his own glazes and tests them on smaller models. He uses low-temperature firing for his pieces, which can be as large as 60 centimeters wide.

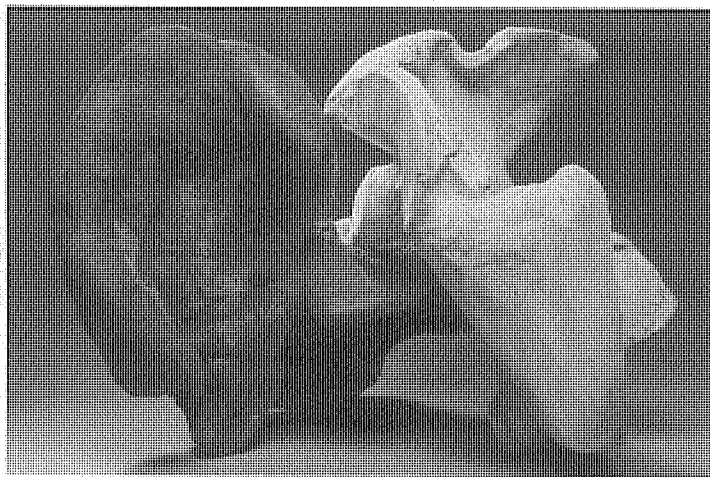
The works hover somewhere between figuration and abstraction. Some forms suggest parts of the body—a hand on a shoulder, a twisted spine, a folding waist. Highly textured glazes give the clay's surface a look of crusted or mutilated skin, indicating trauma. The agony implied by these tortured forms is not accidental.

Chen explains, "A curved shape represents the internal and external form of my mother's sickly body; it contrasts her spoiled body with the love and warmth of her heart." In their physicality, the sculptures project a deeper psychological significance.

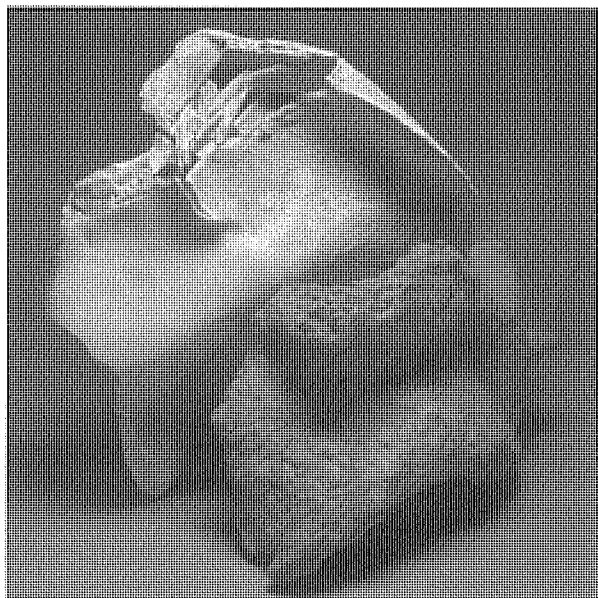
Chen's technical mastery produces characteristics not normally associated with clay. Finished pieces often appear to be made of materials such as stone or bronze. Clay itself is fragile, perishable, and tactile, and it conveys allusiveness, self-consciousness, and temporality; stone and bronze communicate sureness, permanence, force, and even brutality. By playing with illusions of materiality, Chen suggests coexistence among previously incompatible associations; the sculptures communicate varied, sometimes contradictory messages. On an autobiographical level, the body is ever present in the two forms that physically support each other, one representing the mother, and the other, the son. Gender and power attributes engraved into

(continued on page 55)

Kate Farrington is a freelance writer based in Cambridge, MA.



Ray Chen, *Mother and Child*, stoneware and earthenware, 23 x 16 x 18".



Ray Chen, *Mother and Child*, stoneware and earthenware, 51 x 34 x 56".

Each piece combines Eastern and Western influences and is a meditation on the universal idea of the bond between mother and child.

Ceramics

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Mother and Child. Stoneware and earthenware. 132 x 58.5 x 66 cm.

Ceramics of Compassion

Abstract Sculptures of Ray Chen

Article by Patrick Timothy Caughy

ILLUMINATING THE INTERIOR SOURCES OF HER IMAGERY, Georgia O'Keeffe once called her abstracted forms 'equivalents'. She said, "I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at – not a copy of it."¹ O'Keeffe altered essences of visible subject matter to express an unseen reservoir of feeling and empathy which could not be expressed in words.

A parallel path of intensely personal shaping and encoding is evident in the recent ceramic sculpture of Gow Hwei (Ray) Chen. In his dyads of large abstract and faceless forms, all entitled *Mother and Child*, Chen compiles layers of internal, personal sentiment with a masterful command and trust of clay. His compositions become a chorus of filial devotion and pathos.

A 38-year old native of Taiwan, Ray Chen has come to his status as sculptor by an indirect route. Eighteen years of classical training in violin and voice preceded a Bachelor degree from Taiwan University. Awards for vocal performance followed that accomplishment. Discontented with the conformity to the established music of historic composers, Chen found incentive and inspiration in the artistic life of his family. His mother, Cheng Wah Gow, had been a

respected practitioner of Japanese ikebana. Her training attuned his eye and hand to the power of placement, proximity and the evocative tensions of positive and negative spaces.

Departing from professional musical performance, Chen pursued a direction in visual arts. First in drawing, then in clay, he sought a medium which could be both a livelihood and a voice for an emerging sense of independence. Over seven years he acquired skills of handbuilding and the potter's wheel. These were refined amid a circle of craftsmen dedicated to the renewed reproduction of Song Dynasty-styled wares. Lessons gathered in this immersion in traditional disciplines were lasting. "The forms were beautiful and I learnt about classic Chinese aesthetics which emphasise uniformity and smoothness of line and texture," he recalls.

Next he apprenticed with the Taiwanese sculptor, Margaret Sui Tan. Her installation pieces were also influential. In creating new, non-functional components of porcelain, Chen once more integrated prior knowledge. "I think flower arranging influenced me. My mother taught me to think about formal



Mother and Child. Stoneware and earthenware. 132 x 96.5 x 58.5 cm.

qualities of objects and how they exist together in space." His mother's initial training prepared him to comprehend the interplay of space as a personal vocabulary emphasised by Tan.

Emigrating to America in 1991, Chen began a second undergraduate degree in ceramics at Ohio University. He sought an ever-widening bridge between the realms of Eastern and Western artistic practices. In a remark which could well serve as an emblematic refrain he exclaims, "I love freedom – it is why I came to the West and why I changed from music to ceramics." Brad Schwieger, his instructor, also reflects on several aspects to Chen's development. "As an older student Ray was more conceptually inclined in what he brought up in his work. Ray's work always seems to identify his place in the world, for example, Ray Chen and his environment."

Schwieger adds that although his themes may not always have been obvious, what was clear was Chen's "total passion for building and materials – almost taken to extremes". Multiples of stone, glass or found objects became the module forms in which Chen would articulate the mathematics of his place among others.

While at the university, family crises and illness compressed forcefully on Chen's life and art. His mother suffered a descent into disability through Parkinson's disease. This catastrophe became the forge on which to re-examine his sense of family and duty, so requisite a Chinese virtue, with his commitments to an artistic career far from home. As he continued graduate study at the Rochester Institute of

Technology, he discovered solace and example in the innovations of modernism. In the sculpture of Henry Moore, he met an eloquent soloist who enunciated the depths of connection between mother and child. Chen was inspired to reinterpret that ancient and universal theme from his own experience. From an array of tensions over cultures, family demands and artistic traditions, he distilled his own nascent 'equivalents', in clay.

Like O'Keeffe, Moore's genius was to charge abstracted forms, full of twisting spaces, with "spiritual vitality". Such energy, Moore declared had an "indirect expression" – an indirectness consonant with the diffidence ambient in Chinese society. Writing in his 1997 thesis statement, Chen explains how that society prepared him to perceive objects with spiritual significance. "I re-examined myself through Western ideas. I thought about forms, textures, a variety of materials and structural ways to combine this with a sense of spiritual vitality."² Onward from that insight, the theme of *Mother and Child* emerged as an compelling focal point of articulation.

Awarded a fellowship at the Baltimore Clayworks in 1997, Chen has continued residency there as an artist/teacher. Attracting students by the power of his work, he is esteemed for his individual and gentle attention to their needs. Chen remains a generous and integral presence in the ceramic community of the region.

His latest sculptures stood in survey with other claywork artists in the exhibit, *A World of Hands and Fire*. Resting atop custom-built pedestals, this trinity



Mother and Child. Stoneware and earthenware. 117 x 89 x 81.5 cm.

of sculptures is a fresh summation of *Mother and Child*. Resembling worn Roman River gods, these double figures begin as 'seeds'. Chen hand-forms dozens of small clay lumps until he discerns the right form to bear his theme. Unselfconscious play leads to fully refined works as the model is duplicated many times larger. Using a dark, rough-toothed claybody, Chen may utilise wheel-thrown forms to amplify the scale of the figures. Coil applications and meticulous texturing of surfaces, often resembling weathered wood or stone, follows. Patient and one-pointed focus accompanies this gradual gestation.

Critical for their value as symbols, coloured and textured glazes are also developed with discernment. Mature at cone 04, as is the claybody, glazes overlay the work with formal finish, and clues to the narrative and dialogue are suggested in these evocative figures. Chen says, "I took six months to develop these glazes. Always the darker figure is the mother, the smaller lighter one is the child." On one sculpture a dark brown tightly-pulled surface stretches over the winged material element. It is glaze-encrusted with a granular crystal, resembling barnacled marine life. A smooth sheen of matt ivory seals the vertical child figure. Glaze drips suggest tears.

A pinnacle of significance is orchestrated in the silent communion of the two at the point where each leans upon the other. Rhythms of elegant lines,

contrasts of dark and light hues, empty and full spaces all serve the cardinal Chinese principle – balance.

Again the visual and visible is an 'equivalent' for the internal realm of significance. Chen explains, "The touching points are so important to my pieces because that is the energy within myself to be strong." He also recognises a reversal of roles as "the child reaches to protect the mother". With an adventurous sense of experiment, nuance of material and uncommon commitment to craft, Chen offers his work to the viewer with hope and humility. Even as abstraction offers a generous field of access and interpretation, his own intention remains. "It is about concern for my mother; it is how I put all my energy into my voice; that is the language I am trying to achieve with my sculpture."

REFERENCES:

1. *Georgia O'Keeffe – American and Modern*. Charles Eldridge Yale University Press, 1993. p 171.
2. *Mother and Child*. MFA Thesis; Rochester Institute of Technology, Gow Hwei Chen, 1997. p 16.

Patrick Timothy Caughy is a ceramic artist and art educator. A member of the Baltimore Clayworks, he is also an artist in residence at Wesley Theological College in Washington, DC. He serves as an educational consultant at the Freer Collection of the Smithsonian Institution. Ray Chen will receive the Emerging Artist Award at NCECA, 2001, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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Mother and Child 6.
Stoneware, earthenware
73.5 x 106.5 x 78.5 cm.

Cultural Influences

Ray Chen discusses traditional expression in a modern context

HENRY MOORE SAID, "Sculpture for me, must have life in it. By creating vitality and life within a form and meaning is to keep primitive power with a humanist content". Michelangelo also said that "a piece of sculpture should be such that it could be rolled downhill without breaking". Ceramics, the art of making in clay and firing, is among the most ancient arts of man and also is one of the most important. To try to define the beauty and fine art of the material, we consider the unlimited number of appeals we enjoy through ceramics. So it is that some wares feel right in weight and form, and some glazes are far more pleasant to the touch than others. This is ceramics.

Certainly the first cups made were hand-patted and satisfied primitive needs. The Chinese are credited with the discovery that clay can be dense and impermeable at high temperatures. This is one of the major technical discoveries in ceramics. This ware, when fired, turns white and soon the drive was on among potters around the world, with evidence as early as 5000 BC. The influences of Han (206 BC – AD 220) to Six Dynasties (AD 220 – 587) of China, and Chinese porcelain naturally spread to Korea.

The dominant characteristic of Japanese ceramic art is the love of nature. Some Japanese pottery was original in conception; most Japanese porcelain is



Mother and Child 1.
Stoneware, earthenware.
104 x 124.5 x 132 cm

imitative from nature, and the traditional woodfiring and wood-ash glaze are particularly attractive with local clay bodies in Japanese pottery history. In pre-dynastic Egypt as early as 4321 BC, red and black pottery was made and decorated with some angular ornament and freely drawn human and animal motifs.

The Greeks were making pottery as early as 2500 BC. They developed successful pottery-manufacturing technology. The Greeks claim the invention of ceramic art when applied to the representational form of the human figure. The maiolica ware of the 15th century developed by the Moors on the island of Majorca was a type of enamel. Germany is known for salt-glazed stoneware, which first appeared there in the 16th century, and for its Dresden porcelain manufacture.

England has been a leader in the industry. In 1751 in Liverpool, the first successful attempts at transferring engravings to pottery and porcelain were made. Designs were printed in ceramic colours on paper and transferred to ceramics much the same as is done with ceramic decalcomania transfers today. Native American pottery began about 500 AD. The coil method was used; the designs went through periods of realism and conventionalism. Now, American ceramics is showing the influence of the American spirit of its contemporary tradition. Today the cultural influences are less bound by traditions and, through visual communication, have crossed boundaries of cultures.

Cultural influence allows ceramic art education to cross the boundary of cultural experiences and challenges in a profound artistic development. As a Chinese individual in the US and teaching at Indiana State University, I understand that the impact of both these cultural influences communicate in ceramic art education the diversity of universal vision. Ceramic art education through cultural influence is an attempt to reach for the best synthesis of contemporary

If we look back at history and the traditional expression in ceramics, is the history affecting how we think today, how we work as artists, how we communicate, and how we even educate the young and next generations.



Mother and Child 5.
Stoneware, earthenware.
91.5 x 111.5 x 99 cm.

Cultural influences achieve and develop each individual's artistic vocabulary. This impact will help to stimulate the younger generation's creativity and direct them into more successful life experiences.

communication and to find a link with younger generations.

Drawing from cultural experiences and a philosophical vision of the world, the extraordinary power of ceramic art education will help young generations and artists. International student exchanges, residency programs, conferences and symposiums and cross-cultural exhibition opportunities are some examples of ways to create hope. This is experimentation for new and different inspirations and serious intellectual and critical exploration for students.

Ceramic art education that notes cultural influences also promotes a strong artistic development with the broadest positive definition in the international visual arts community. Cultural experience is ideally suited to explore new ideas and contexts and has the potential to stimulate creativity and promote the sharing of skills and cultural impulsion between personal and cultural aesthetics. It would also provide young generations the freedom of wider international fertile interconnection with the global ceramic profession.

The total commitment of ceramic art education characterises every reason to hope for expanding one's world. I believe that ceramic art education reflects a clay artist's development and movement, and it opens a vast new world of possibilities and flexibilities with knowledge through one's imagination.

I communicate Asian ceramic traditions to modern American culture, for instance, by using Eastern traditions, materials and techniques, and by reinterpreting them in a contemporary context. In Chinese art, there is a consistent characteristic in composition that is 'nature' and 'symmetry' as well as 'balance' and 'stability', and these are the most important elements for expression.



Mother and Child 7.
Stoneware, earthenware.
147 x 109 x 106.5 cm.

It also forms the focus of my vision in the series of my work *Mother and Child*. The Chinese characteristics can purify and engage the American culture through education and professional communication. Natural material resources and traditional Eastern techniques communicate in the modern Western society of America through ceramic art education. Through my art training, knowledge, personal expression, cultural aesthetics and communication, I share and serve the Asian tradition of cultural ceramic art history and movement to the vastly different cultural background of American society.

From an historical point of view to the contemporary witnessed by eye, the material and conception are the product of our interpretation. Meaning is the result of understanding. The message is not only present in images but also reflects the truthfulness of our own experiences. More importantly, art and art education are continuing to cross cultural boundaries through cultural experience and artistic development. A young generation's continuous originality and vision presents the clarity of artistic purpose that will make great artists.

The statement of *Mother and Child* expresses, through cultural influence, the development of expression that characterises the quality of originality through the material to images, from East to West as well as from tradition to the contemporary, as follows: For the past several years, I have addressed in my work the central relationship between my mother and myself. Eighteen years ago, she contracted Parkinson's disease. As the only son in my family and in accord with the tradition of Chinese culture, it came to me to take full responsibility for her and be strong. As a result, my relationship with my mother grew. I

Ceramic art education attempts to clarify the significance of technique and material, form and content, history and process, possibilities and creativity, value and conception, image, communication and the future in order to cross the generations, either directly or indirectly.



encouraged her with love and warmth and I told her I loved her. On May 7th, 2003, my mother left her physical body and she is in God's hands now. Her love is there as always. My sculpture is also the testimony of my faith.

My sculptural exploration of form, space and line has become my outer language to embody my inner feelings about this experience. I value form, space and line between the internal and the external – one cannot exist without the other. It has also expressed the crossed boundaries between Eastern and Western culture and aesthetics – as well as the physical distance between my mother and myself.

Mother and Child is a connection over space and distance with my mother. It is a measurement in feelings through my personal experience, presenting movement, energy, love, relationship, honesty and integrity. It is a dialogue. It is a vocabulary of visual communication. As a ceramic art educator, I always encourage my students to create experiences and to work with challenges, to remain true to oneself and that any mark of honesty has potential. I always want to make a special environment for my students. This includes structure, discipline, challenge and personal direction. I also encourage my students to consider their personal and social values when making professional goals and prepare them to meet life's challenges with confidence and purpose.

Finally, ceramic art education through the material – clay – connects cultures from tradition to the contemporary. As an artist, as an educator, I share my experience with my students, and help students to grow. Using simple, profound truths through education is to empower the material to stir emotion and creation to share among ourselves. *Mother and Child* is one of the examples of cultural influence – from traditional expression to modern context.

Mother and Child 3.
Stoneware, earthenware.
106.5 x 157.5 x 109

Ray Chen is a ceramic ceramics professor at Indiana State University, US. Photography: Gagne. This article adapted from a lecture Ray Chen at the International Ceramic Magazine Education Association (ICMEA) in China in 2007.

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Form Follows Feeling

The Work of Ray Chen

CERAMICS SCULPTURE IN CONTEMPORARY ART CAN BE sub-divided into representational (human, animal, plants and natural forms) and abstract form, including geometric, organic and architectural shapes. "In order to energise space, some artists may combine multiple elements into a larger ceramic object."¹ In this way, Ray Chen follows the tradition of Henry Moore and his stone and bronze works studying the female form. Like Moore, Chen does not do these works specifically to be sold.² Moore's influence is evident in Chen's work. Like Moore's work, Chen deals with multiple pieces that interrelate. This is the path that Chen has chosen to follow.

To understand Chen and his work, you must go back to his beginnings and his family in Taiwan. You must understand his educational background and his mother, Cheng Wah Kuo, shaping him. He excels in the violin and opera, these were areas in which his mother directed him. She also was trained in Japanese flower arrangement and Chen came to appreciate the curves and the inter-relationships of those curves and the blooms.

Chen mastered what his mother taught him, tired of performing music that was written by other people

and turned first to drawing and then ceramics. Clay always has had the ability to emulate other media in form, texture and surface treatment of other objects since the time of ancient civilisations. Surface treatment was a prominent aspect of ancient ceramics that Chen also uses in his series, *Mother and Child*.

In his own words Chen states: "the relationship between people has been the core theme of my ceramic sculpture *Mother and Child*. For the past

Article by Dr Stephen Smithers

several years, I have addressed in my work the central relationship between my mother and myself. Seventeen years ago, she came down with Parkinson's disease." In 1996 his mother's Parkinson's disease worsened. "As the only son in my family and in accord with the tradition of Chinese culture, it became my role to take full responsibility of her and be strong. As a result, my relationship with my mother grew. I encouraged her with love and warmth. On May 7, 2003, my mother left her physical body and she is in God's hands. Her love has been around as always and she has more to offer. My sculpture is also then a testimony of my faith."

"My sculptural exploration of form, space and line has become my outer language to embody my inner feelings about the experience. I value form,



Facing page: Figure 1.
Above: Figure 2.

space and line between the internal and external – one cannot exist without the other. It has also expressed the crossed boundaries between Eastern and Western cultures and aesthetics – as well as the physical distance between my mother and myself."

Chen's early ceramics training in Taiwan focused on creating pots based on the traditional ideals of China's Song dynasty (AD 960–1279). Some of his functional vessels today still draw upon the shapes and glazes that formed the body of his work in Taiwan. In 1991 Chen moved to the US and completed two and a half years of foundation courses at Ohio University and went on to graduate work which he finished in 1997 at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. Since then, Chen has devoted himself to teaching as well as giving visiting artist lectures and taking part in numerous international ceramics workshops. Few artists have an exhibition record that can compare to that of Chen. Currently, he serves as the executive director and curator of the Halcyon Art Gallery that is part of the Swope Art Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana. The gallery focuses on contemporary art drawn from the region and beyond.

Much like a fledgling bird receiving nourishment from its mother, Chen continues to be nourished as a creative artist by his mother. Her spiritual and artistic inspiration continues to shape Chen's response to his life and environment.

Chen's *Mother and Child* series began in 1998 and all sculptures in the series are installations presenting two or more pieces in a spatial arrangement critical to Chen's feelings for his mother. Most of his earlier works in the series make use of earthenware and

stoneware. The mother form is usually larger and darker in colour and incorporates a rough textural surface reflective of the toll the Parkinson's disease had upon his mother's body. The child form is usually lighter in colour and smoother in shape, but sometimes includes texture reflective of Chen's own pain. The two pieces support each other with the negative shapes taking on equal weight to

those of the positive shapes. This delicate balance lends itself well to the name of the series and the attachment of the two pieces serves as an umbilical cord. Both depend on each other for support. If one were broken or removed, the other would not make sense. In some cases, an implied line across space provides the necessary link between the two forms as they reach out to each other.



Above, clockwise from top left: Figure 3, Figure 5, Figure 6 and Ray Chen.

Often Chen's sculptures begin with drawings and the creation of a *maquette* in clay prior to the creation of the larger sculpture. Besides his relationship with his mother, he also brings in responses to nature, experiences, feelings and his deep religious faith. He then starts to create the large scale *Mother and Child* by throwing forms on the wheel and sometimes handbuilding. The forms are then aggressively manipulated to form the units that make up the sculpture. Low fire glazes and slips of Chen's own creation then are used to add colour and emphasise both texture and movement through the final installation. The finished pieces are either in prominent collections around the world or in travelling exhibitions worldwide. Commitments in 2013 included solo as well as group exhibitions at the National Art School and the Sabbia Art Gallery in Sydney, Australia and visiting artist lectures and workshops at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. Chen was also invited as one of the speakers to lecture at the *Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale 2013*, Icheon World Ceramics Foundation, Korea.

Figure 1 illustrates the *Mother and Child* (2009)

To understand Chen and his work, you must go back to his beginnings and his family in Taiwan. You must understand his educational background and his mother, Cheng Wah Kuo, shaping him.

Chen has produced in earthenware and stoneware. Everything is taken into account in the installation: the pedestal, placement of the individual units, lighting, colour, negative space and the linear linking of the units across space. Much like a fledgling bird receiving nourishment from its mother, Chen continues to be nourished as a creative artist by his mother. Her spiritual and artistic inspiration

continues to shape Chen's response to his life and environment. In 2011, Chen was the NCECA International Residency Program recipient and was supported as an artist at the School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

In 2011, Chen's *Mother and Child* series took a new turn with regard to his media and form (Figures 2–6). He was invited to take part in "Porcelain Another Way", a workshop and international symposium held in Wroclaw, Poland. The challenge was to make large scale sculpture out of porcelain.

The symposium climaxed with three exhibitions in The Glass and Ceramics Museum, Wroclaw; The Galeria Szkie Ceramics BWA, Wroclaw-luty; and the National Museum of Fine Arts, Warsaw. From these venues the exhibition has continued to other sites throughout Europe.

In his work produced for the symposium in Poland, Chen continued the *Mother and Child* theme divorced

of colour. Texture remains in the juxtaposition of the form of the mother and the child. The pristine whiteness of the medium emphasises the curvilinear links between the mother and child and enhances the interplay of positive and negative shapes within and between the forms as they interlink across space. The increased scale of the child is reflective of the growth of the child over time. Like the earlier works within the series, each element is dependent upon its link with the other for healing and spiritual survival over time. In one of the series (Figure 4) three elements are introduced as the mother form both nurses and protects her young, much like a bird. The curves link the three across space and juxtapose the smooth surface of the young while continuing the textured surface in the body of the mother that transforms to smooth curving shapes as it reaches out to her young. The dark negative spaces enhance the curves of the forms and the tonal gradations across the lit shapes. As with his prior work within this long series, the forms delicately balance on single points relying on the connection with the mother for nurturing support.

To Chen, "porcelain is a new direction to achieve the way of movement and sensitivity to material. It is an experiment in how I am going to combine the pure clay body to the form with the relationship in texture and negative space, line and the space in between. Form and its language will be a major task and quality in form as well as my own new direction to develop. Porcelain will be a part of my *Mother and Child* form/series. How and the way I am going to handle it will be the next level I will need to work on."³

Ray Chen plans to continue to explore the nuances of different clay bodies as he continues the bond of mother and child in new ways. Porcelain will present a new dimension to his *Mother and Child* series and the life-long bond with his mother, Cheng Wah Kuo.

Figure 4.

ENDNOTES

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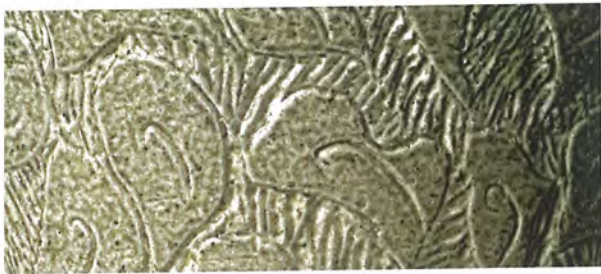
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Salzbrand

Keramik 2006





OBJEKTE Vase und Dose: H 36 cm und 13 cm, B 25 und 9 cm, 2003

MATERIAL & DEKOR Steinzeug, gedreht auf der Scheibe, Salz

BRAND Reduktion bei Segerkegel 10, gebrannt bei 1300°C



1962 geboren

1997 Master of Fine Arts am Rochester Institute of Technology/American Craft Program

zurzeit Assistenzprofessur an der University of Southern Maine

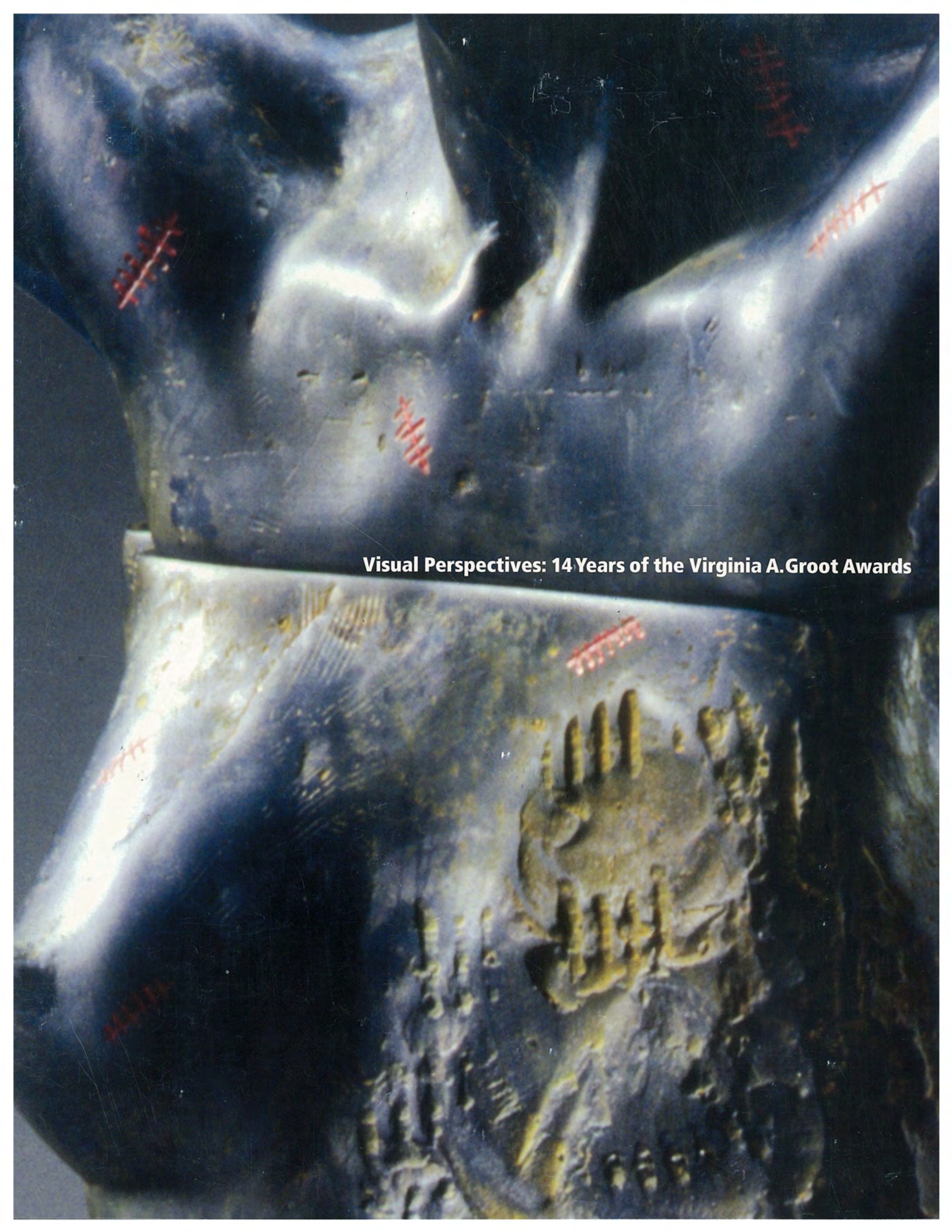
Auszeichnung durch den National Council als Nachwuchstalent/Keramik des Jahres 2001

zahlreiche internationale Ausstellungen

Teilnahme an folgenden Wettbewerben „The Virginia A. Groot Foundation Grant“, „The Sydney Myer International Ceramic Award“, „The 3rd & 4th Cheongju International Craft Biennale Korea“ und „Lormina Salter Fellowship Award“

Ray Chen ^{USA}





Visual Perspectives: 14 Years of the Virginia A. Groot Awards



Ray Chen
Chinese, b. Taiwan, 1962
Mother and Child 4, 2001
stoneware, earthenware
H: 19" L: 32" W: 21"
On loan from the artist

Photo: Robert Curran